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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conspiracy drama which characterizes the rhetoric generated by the John Birch Society. According to the Society, "innocent" America is under direct threat from some organized external and internal force that is seeking its destruction. Members are called to react in a carefully outlined manner: (1) piece together the conspiracy, (2) uncover the secret plans or hideouts of the villain, and (3) punish the conspirators for treason. The group is united by a fundamentalist religious background, by a literal interpretation of the Bible and sacred civil documents like the Constitution, and by a lack of democratic process within the organization itself. The paper asserts that these same factors, while responsible for the Society's internal unity, also explain its inability to alter the course of the American political system. (MAI)

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Conspiracy Drama and the John Birch
Society: A Movement Reconsidered

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The radical right has long been a potent force in American political and social life. The Ku Klux Klan, the National States Rights Party, the American Nazi Party, the Liberty Lobby, the American Independent Party, the Young Americans for Freedom and the John Birch Society all emerge as prominent examples of far right social movements.

Of these many radical right organizations the John Birch Society stands as a unique archetype of American anti-Communism. "Birchism" has been synonymous with a chauvinistic American nationalism and an unwavering commitment to the American political system. The John Birch Society is representative of the anti-Communist extremism which characterized the 1950s and early 1960s. The Bircher's project these beliefs into the seventies even though they, at times, seem almost anachronistic. Although the John Birch Society has long been rejected by most mainstream conservatives, it remains active and communicates with an enraged membership and a curious public.

During the John Birch Society's twenty-year history few comprehensive rhetorical studies have been undertaken. To date, research has focused primarily upon the speeches of single Society members, the factual content and argumentative posture of those messages, or the generic characteristics typifying a unique rhetorical style.¹ In general, these past studies have been unable to offer a composite view of John Birch Society rhetoric which specifically grapples with such issues as the reasons for the saliency of Society rhetoric or factors which promote or deter Society membership. In general, although one might surmise that John Birch Society rhetoric has been exhaustively examined, little effort at

revealing the complexity and strategies of the Society's rhetorical drama has been spent.

This paper examines the conspiracy drama which characterizes the rhetoric generated by the Birch Society. Through an analysis of the conspiracy, and how it develops, the paper offers arguments concerning the Society's successful maintenance of internal unity. In addition, the conspiracy drama explains the Society's inability to dramatically alter the course of the American political system. The conspiracy rhetoric is thus shown to be the source of success as well as the failure of the Society's rhetoric.

The Structure and Organization of the John Birch Society

The John Birch Society was founded in December of 1958 when Robert Welch, a retired candy manufacturer, met with friends and laid out his plans for a semi-secret society to combat Communism. Little is known about the establishment of the Society other than what is described in the official membership manual, The Blue Book.² It is clear that the membership grew quickly as chapters were established throughout the country.

While membership lists in the Society are secret, clues as to the extent of membership are available. The Society boasts of 80 to 100 thousand members. In addition, it maintains a chain of 360 bookstores operated by the local chapters as well as publishing firms devoted to the production of Society literature. Members generally subscribe to the Society's two magazines, American Opinion and the Review of the News. The Society also reaches the public via radio broadcasts espousing a line of support for the reactionary cause.³ Finally, the movement claims to have a paid staff of 250 employees maintaining two national offices and five regional offices.⁴ The John Birch Society is not only capable of reaching and influencing a large number of people through their media appeals, but they can deliver a significant number of letters to any government official considering

any issue of policy the Society deems important.

The Society, by and large, speaks with one voice and thus demonstrates a degree of cohesiveness rare in any social movement. The Society speaks with one voice largely because it is not by nature democratic. Robert Welch is not only the founder of the John Birch Society but he is also its undisputed source of direction. The Society stresses the fact that Welch is the leader and that members are to follow his leadership. The rhetoric justifies the lack of democratic participation by arguing:

Perhaps the most practical reason for the John Birch Society being monolithic is the fact that, if it had not been, it easily could have been infiltrated by Communist agents. Posing as sincere, hard-working, anti-Communists, they could have either taken over completely or, at least, bogged us down in endless debates, arguments, committee actions, splinter movements, and parliamentary quicksand.⁵

This defense is revealing, for it illustrates the Society is aware of the apparent inconsistencies, when the movement which supposedly defends "the American way" adopts a structure which appears essentially un-American.

Birchers argue that the United States is not a democracy and was never meant to be a democracy. They note that "democracy" does not appear in either the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence. Instead they claim the U.S. is a republic, and republican leadership suggests that people should exert power only within the limits of rigid and unbending controls.⁶ Birch organizers also stress the notion that if the Society recommends a course of action that an individual member finds unacceptable he/she should not take part.⁷

Welch is supposedly guided in his leadership decisions by the members of the Council of the John Birch Society. The Council members include many of the original founders of the Society as well as other individuals who are especially committed to Society principles and active in the organization. If any formal organizational structure specifies their role in controlling or checking Welch's

power, it is not a matter of public record.

While vocal disagreement among members riddles the women's movement, the black movement, or the gay movement, the Birch Society has functioned as a formal and tightly organized body with access to print and radio media for almost twenty years without visible internal tension. The absence of internal discontent is an important characteristic of the Birch Society and helps explain the continuing power of the movement. This paper will suggest that the organization is able to function with so little discontent because of the very fundamental belief to which members subscribe, the conspiracy view of history.

The Method Considered

This paper argues that the rhetorical vision⁸ most appropriate for explaining the rhetoric of the John Birch Society is the conspiracy drama. This drama portrays the innocence that is America under direct threat from some organized, external and internal cancer seeking destruction. John Cragan, in his article on rhetorical strategy, provides some explanations for the conspiracy drama in American society. This concept of conspiracy drama offers a methodological framework for this study:

The conspiracy drama has long been a popular rhetorical mode for Americans to frame their social reality. From the "Anti-Papal" rhetoric in Colonial times through "McCarthyism" to the present "Watergate" drama, many Americans have tended to weave "here and now" events and fantasy themes into a conspiracy drama.⁹

As the John Birch Society seems to be a part of that legacy left over from McCarthyism, it is appropriate to use conspiracy drama to explore its rhetoric.

Cragan also directs attention to a discussion of how conspiracy dramas "chain out" to become rhetorical visions and he offers some potential keys to understanding these visions. He suggests that it is likely in a conspiracy drama for there to be the development of a "super-hero":

The hero is a character of such moral stature that he can defeat the conspiracy. He is usually a man who has dedicated his life to the careful study of the villain and over the years has developed the ability to spot the few available signs of the evil one--signs that the average person could easily overlook.¹⁰

It is easy to isolate the "super-heroes" of the John Birch Society. The first such "super-hero" is John Birch, the Society's namesake. One Society publication relates:

John Birch was a young American missionary in China when war was declared between the United States and Japan. He joined the Armed Forces under General Chennault and carried out dangerous missions deep behind enemy lines. His sincere friendship for the Chinese people and his devotion to their cause earned for John Birch their deep respect and unhesitating loyalty. Because of his dedication and bravery, he soon became a hero and a legend in his own time.

John Birch had been outspoken in his opposition to Communism. Undoubtedly he would have provided strong anti-Communist leadership in post-war China. But he was murdered by Chinese Communists only a few days after the end of the war.

In his life, John Birch exemplified the best of American qualities and traditions. In his death, there was the symbolic beginning of World War III; a deadly conflict between the forces of Americanism and Communism that still rages around us today. It is for this reason the Society is named in his honor.¹¹

While John Birch is dead and no longer able to lead the fight against the conspiracy, his relationship to the movement is almost spiritual. He serves not only as a hero but also as a martyr--an example of the values for which the Society stands.

The second "super-hero" of the Society, of course, is the founder, Robert Welch. Society publications continually praise both the insight and the ability of Welch and his accuracy at finding conspirators regardless of where they lurk. As Griffin states:

The story of Robert Welch is one of a gifted child who learned to read at two, began studying Latin and Algebra at five, entered the University of North Carolina at twelve. He is an accomplished mathematician who has worked seriously on Fermat's Last Theorem. He has knowledge of five languages, loves classical poetry, and has written extensively in the fields of Philosophy and History.¹²

As far as Welch's ability to "sniff out" Communists, the dramatic plot suggests he was the first voice heard to proclaim that a bearded Communist conspirator named Fidel Castro was taking hold in Cuba.¹³ Of course, Welch has also been studying the conspiracy for many years which makes him most capable of leading the battle against it.

Birch Society members proclaim other "super-heroes" as well. J. Edgar Hoover and Senator Joseph McCarthy are seen by Birchers as loyal Americans attacked only by leftists who have themselves been tainted by the conspiracy.

Cragan argues that the conspiracy drama develops according to some very predictable action lines or potential motives for the "super-hero": "(1) piecing together the conspiracy; (2) uncovering the secret plans or the secret hideouts of the villain; and (3) punishing the conspirator."¹⁴ Welch and Society authors piece together the conspiracy and describe its threats and they also reveal how and in what institutions the conspirators hide in their attempts to seduce the American people into the destruction of their own society. Finally, Birch rhetoric stresses how the conspirators should be removed from their positions of authority and be tried for treason.

Development of the Conspiracy Theme

To understand the conspiracy theme is to understand the drama uniting John Birch Society members. This drama indicates that Birchers embrace a very fundamentalist approach to life situations. This includes a fundamentalist religious background and a literal interpretation of the Bible and sacred civil documents such as the Constitution. Dale Leathers, in a work entitled, "Fundamentalism of the Radical Right," observed:

Reactionary rhetoric is a religious manifestation with political overtones rather than a political manifestation with religious overtones. While the reactionary fixates on the issue of Communist infiltration, his analysis of Communism springs directly from his fundamentalist value system.¹⁵

Richard Hofstadter was one of the first to recognize the relationship between religious fundamentalism and political fundamentalism and made it one of the key arguments in his article entitled, "Psuedo-Conservatism Revisited: A Postscript."¹⁶

It is not difficult to find this fundamentalism in pronouncements of the Birch Society. Welch in the Blue Book states: "The true fundamentalists in our midst, whether Catholics, Protestants or Jews, are the moral salt of the earth--where such salt is like a stream of clear water in a desert."¹⁷ These fundamentalist beliefs become the fabric of the rhetorical vision permeating the different levels of the conspiracy as Birchers argue the conspiracy threatens all American institutions.

The grand conspiratorial design within the Birch Society places current manifestations within the framework of a two hundred year old international conspiracy that has as its aim the destruction of American society and the enslavement of the free world. The conspiracy view of history itself has evolved and the conspiracy revealed in recent Birch literature is even more sinister than that described in the 1950s. The apparent enemy of the Birchers is of course the Communists, but Communists, terrible as they seem, are not at the roots of the drama:

To us, Communism is merely the current manifestation of certain forces that have been around for a long time under different labels. Long after Communism has been destroyed and relegated to the dusty pages of history, these same forces will continue to plague future generations as well, but under a new name.¹⁸

The notion of conspirators existing outside of the Communist movement and as part of an old tradition is consistent with Leather's observation that the members of the radical right have a deep distrust of man himself.¹⁹

The conspiratorial view of history sees all events as having been guided by conscious decisions to co-opt "democratic" order. For Birchers the roots of the conspiracy lie within a power-hungry, wealthy establishment seeking total

control of the world's economy, workforce, and government. This conspiracy is traced from secret societies which existed in Europe. Birchers argue that the conspiracy began when Adam Weishaupt founded the Order of the Illuminati on May 1, 1776 for the purposes of taking control over the world.²⁰ The drama reflects the conviction that the conspiracy lives on and is directed by a different body today. In Europe the conspiracy is said to be directed by a secret society called the Bilderbergers. According to Gary Allen, author of a sacred Birch work entitled None Dare Call It Conspiracy:

The international group calls itself the Bilderbergers. . . . This strange name is taken from the site of the first meeting in May, 1954--the Hotel de Bilderberg in Oostebeek, Holland. The man who created the Bilderbergers is his Royal Highness Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands. The Prince is an important figure in the Royal Dutch Petroleum (Shell Oil) and the Societe General de Belgique, a huge conglomerate cartel with world wide holdings. The Bilderbergers meet once--or sometimes twice--a year. Those in attendance include leading political and financial figures from the United States and Western Europe. Prince Bernhard makes no effort to hide the fact that the ultimate goal of the Bilderbergers is a world government. In the meantime while the "new world order" is being built, the Bilderbergers coordinate the efforts of the European and American power elites.²¹

The specific structure or otherwise stated goals of the Bilderbergers are never mentioned by Birchers probably because the illusion of a secret society of wealth and power actively seeking world domination is more frightening than reality. The conspiracy thus exists beyond the power of the Communists, the actual villains being even more sinister.

In the United States, Birchers maintain, the conspiracy is assisted by the Council of Foreign Relations. This Council is portrayed as another secretive organization in which members meet behind closed doors to discuss how to "overtake the American spirit" and move the United States into the hands of the "collectivists." Why the Council of Foreign Relations is charged with this heinous crime is unclear, but Birchers believe the Council is the principle means by which

the conspirators gain access to the American power structure. They also observe that Nixon, Rockefeller, Humphrey, Ford, and most other politicians of any stature are members of the Council, and this membership is tacit admission that they are a part of the conspiracy.²² Not even the Council of Foreign Relations is at the center of the conspiracy, however, for even it is influenced by a power from within which manipulates all decisions.

According to Birchers the "collectivist" conspiracy is not run from Moscow or Peking, but is an arm of a greater conspiracy which is being run from New York, Paris, and London. This is the conspiracy of the wealthy. The Birchers call these conspirators the "Insiders":

The men at the apex of this movement are not Communists in the traditional sense of that term. They feel no loyalty to Moscow or Peking. They are loyal only to themselves and their undertaking. And these men certainly do not believe in the clap-trap pseudo-philosophy of Communism. They have no intention of dividing their wealth. Socialism is a philosophy which conspirators exploit, but in which only the naive believe.²³

The Birchers do not hesitate to name participants. At the top of the list of conspirators are Nelson and David Rockefeller, Cyrus Eaton, the Rothschild family and the Morgan family of the banking trust. These are the people Birchers accuse most directly of attempting to sell America to the "collectivists." Birchers claim that by succeeding in the conspiracy these wealthy families would be able to "increase their stranglehold" on the world and assure themselves monopolies and controlled labor societies resulting in maximum wealth and power.²⁴

The literature contains many examples which evidence the pervasiveness of the conspiracy. The Federal Reserve Board is but one example of conspirators taking control of one branch of the American government (according to the argument the Federal Reserve Board completely controls the American economy and can, at will, create massive unemployment and inflation). The Birch drama traces the moves for the Federal Reserve Board to Senator Nelson Aldrich who happens to

be Nelson Rockefeller's maternal grandfather. This is seen as absolute evidence of the link between Nelson Rockefeller and the conspiracy to adopt the Federal Reserve Bank.²⁵ This vision indicates the Federal Reserve Board has no purpose other than to facilitate the centralization of wealth for the benefit of international bankers.²⁶

A more recent example of the conspiracy at work is the suggestion in Birch literature that when Nelson Rockefeller realized he could not be elected to the Presidency (because the power of the "Insiders" was not yet great enough), he was able to get someone he controlled, Richard Nixon, elected in his place. The conspiracy holds that the image of Nixon and Rockefeller as personal antagonists was only a facade to dupe the American public. Evidence of the fraud is suggested by the fact that Nixon lived in the same apartment building as Rockefeller in New York, a building that Rockefeller owned; Nixon joined the law firm with John Mitchell who was Rockefeller's attorney; and Nixon hired Kissinger who was an "ultra-red" follower of Rockefeller.²⁷ The conspiracy vision is completed as members begin to see a sinister Rockefeller pulling strings controlling a puppet Nixon.

There is within the rhetorical vision specific evidence that Richard Nixon was a Communist or a member of the conspiracy. Nixon committed many sins during his Presidency, all attributable to Rockefeller. Specifically, Nixon was charged with the adoption of wage-price controls in peacetime, the visit to Red China, and detente with Soviet Russia. These were all unacceptable to the Birch Society and, therefore, prove Nixon was a tool of the Reds.²⁸ In addition, they demonstrated that Rockefeller works in a very mysterious fashion which supports the belief that the conspiracy is especially insidious.

The conspiracy vision sees no level at which the American citizens can let down their guard and trust an official of government. The Society, in fact,

preaches that there should be little trust for anyone but Society spokesmen. As John Stormer, author of None Dare Call It Treason, states: "Statements by any government official mean nothing. The American people can have no faith, no trust in anything told them by their government leaders."²⁹ The conspiracy would not only act to break any faith people would have in their government, but in other institutions as well.

Educational institutions at all levels are drawn into the conspiracy as Birchers seek to find evidence of corruption. One example referred to a story supposedly found in a basic reading text for elementary students:

A book for today's six year old: 'A little squirrel named Bobby ate nuts from a tree during the summer. Other squirrels suggested that Bobby put some nuts away for the winter. As Bobby did not like to work, he ignored the advice.

Winter came and one morning Bobby awakened to find the world covered with snow--and all the nuts were gone from the tree. He got awfully hungry but remembered that a boy who lived in a white house had taken some of the nuts from his tree during the summer. Bobby went to the white house and gave a squirrel call. A door opened and a 'fine brown nut' rolled out. Bobby Squirrel learned his lesson. The story concludes: 'Well!' thought Bobby. 'I know how to get my dinner. All I have to do is ask for it.'³⁰

Stormer, author of this criticism, concluded that this was a perfect example of the way by which conspirators in the education system were attempting to subvert or trick students into accepting socialism.³¹ It is noteworthy to point out that Stormer did not footnote the reading text the passage supposedly came from making it impossible to determine if the passage even exists.

It is not only the elementary schools that are indicted by the conspiracy, high schools are attacked because some books surveyed by the Society revealed comments claiming that patriotism and extreme nationalism were undesirable characteristics. This is, of course, mild criticism when compared to that aimed at the universities which tend to be "Godless" creations where students are taught how to reject American values. One problem cited by the Society is that

the display of the American flag is neglected in virtually all university classrooms.³²

The John Birch Society also stresses that the conspiracy is gaining access to the public through their churches and religious organizations. As Stormer argued: "Through control of religious organizations and magazines, Sunday School literature, prominent seminaries and journals of theological thought, they guide the thinking and paralyze the action of thousands of other dedicated men of God--by controlling the information they get."³³ Further evidence of this attempt to subvert the church is provided from speeches by the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and often referred to in Society rhetoric.³⁴ The real assumption, of course, is that J. Edgar Hoover is privy to much classified information and his descriptions of conspiratorial threats must be accurate.

The conspirators also control the unions, of course, and union members are told that they should fight their unions wherever they can. The Society argues the guilt of unions is not the fault of the workers, "who are as loyal and dedicated to the United States as any group in the nation," but warns that they have been swindled and duped by the Communists.³⁵

With conspirators so prevalent in American society it becomes clear that there is almost no one left who can be trusted. People are told their government is corrupt, as are their churches, their schools, and their unions. Belief in the conspiracy will logically bring members to the point where they will feel the only persons that can be trusted are the spokespersons for the Society who have the "truth" since they don't attack each other. As Epstein and Forster argued:

The members of the John Birch Society are the believers in the conspiracy theory of history, and in absolute political truth which they alone claim to possess. It is through the conspiracy theory that fear is aroused--fear, the essential ingredient of extremist strength.³⁶

The rhetorical vision implies that Birch propaganda is the only truth existing outside of a literal interpretation of the Bible, in a world filled with lies. As Griffin states: "We have nothing to hide. Therefore, we have no reason to lie, and wouldn't want to even if we could. Truth is a far superior weapon than deceit. It's a weapon denied to them. In the end, it will be a decisive weapon that will destroy them completely."³⁷

If the John Birch Society is presented as the one source of truth, then the vision sees conspirators as the example of the "greatest lie." The vision specifies that the Communists tell a lie that is so big that nobody will believe it is a lie.³⁸ This is a masterful advantage of the conspiracy theory. If you accept the conspiracy vision nothing can ever be demonstrated to prove it wrong. If counter-evidence is provided which denies the essence of your beliefs, it only serves as an example of "how tricky" or insidious the conspirators are. There can thus be no end to the ability of the conspiracy to explain encountered situations and the drama becomes self fulfilling. This incidently was the argument Welch used when he observed that the greatest advantage the conspirators have is the innocence of the American people, for they are too "good" to believe these terrible things could be true. Welch in an attack on President Eisenhower declared:

The fundamentally decent American mind just will not grasp the kind of enemy with which it has to deal. One disastrous manifestation of this innocence is that the American people refuse to suspect Eisenhower of complicity in the Communist plot despite all of the clear evidence right in front of their faces.³⁹

The vision holds that only the John Birch Society, through an interpretation of reality labeled "truth," can teach the American people to see through all of this deceit.

Someone outside the conspiracy vision might not take this rhetoric seriously. One almost gets the feeling the tale is so incredibly told that if Birchers could

be forced to look at it rationally their minds would be changed. To think so would be to have totally misunderstood the nature of the conspiracy and the role it plays as rhetorical reality for Birch Society members. The Society recognizes that conspiracy theory sounds incredible and is difficult for people to accept and confronts the issue directly:

When you think about it, there are really only two theories of history. Either things happen by accident neither planned nor caused by anybody, or they happen because they are planned and somebody causes them to happen. In reality, it is the 'accidental theory of history' preached in the unchallenged Halls of Ivy which should be ridiculed.⁴⁰

The vision thus contains a defense for the issue of believability by creating a dichotomy--things either occur on one extreme or the other. There is no allowance for the notion that events in history could have been planned, but unrelated.

The conspiracy theory of history is, according to Birchers, not accepted by academics because of their conspiratorial biases:

Why is it that virtually all 'reputable' scholars and mass media columnists and commentators reject the cause and effect or conspiratorial theory of history? Primarily, most scholars follow the crowd in the academic world as most women follow fashions. To buck the tide means social and professional ostracism. The same is true of the mass media. While professors and pontificators profess to be tolerant and broadminded, in practice it's strictly a one-way street--with all traffic flowing left.⁴¹

The rhetoric also suggests that a conspiracy would not be very effective if everyone knew about it, so "the first job of any conspiracy, whether it be in politics, crime, or within a business office, is to convince everyone else that no conspiracy exists."⁴² The conspiracy is thus the force which motivates Birchers to action, shapes their motives, and becomes their reality.

Final Considerations

The Birch Society's rhetorical vision not only describes how to slay the

dragon that is the conspiracy, and how to punish the conspirators, but also the kind of government and the kind of society which would result if the recommended actions were taken.

The rhetoric of the Society argues the enemy can be defeated by clear and decisive action. As Allen states:

The conspiracy can be defeated. The Insiders are not omnipotent. It is true that they control important parts of the federal government, high finance and mass media. But they do not control everything, or the vise would already have been closed. We might say that they control everything but you.⁴³

The vision urges action by encouraging participation in Society activities. Followers are told to bring their friends to meetings and to pass on publications. Individual Birch chapters also work on letter-writing campaigns and other lobbying activities designed to influence policy.

The American society which would exist if the Birchers had their way would be a very different one from that which now exists. The society would be profoundly more religious, but there would be less emphasis on organized religion. There would be less governmental control of the economy, but more restrictions on civil liberties and individual freedoms. There would have been no civil rights movement, no federal income tax, no regulatory agencies, no social security, and no medicare. Welfare programs would be voluntary and would probably be supported by churches rather than by governments. The military would almost certainly be more active in asserting policy around the world. The Supreme Court would be severely hampered by the public's ability to elect and recall justices. While this American society would clearly be radically different, it is not one that we are ever likely to face, for even if the membership in the Birch Society is growing, as their books claim, we seem to be moving farther and farther away from the kind of government that would please Birch Society members.

Robert Welch argues a better America exists at the end of this great battlefield:

[We must] push the Communists back, get out of this bed of Europe that is dying with this cancer of collectivism, and breath our own healthy air of opportunity, enterprise, and freedom; then the cancer we already have, even though it is of considerable growth, can be cut out. And despite the bad scars and the loss of some muscles, this young, strong, great new nation, restored to vigor, courage, ambition, and self-confidence, can still go ahead and fulfill its great destiny, and to become an even more glorious example for all the earth than it ever was before.⁴⁴

The vision for America represented here seems much like the social Darwinism that surrounded the Spanish-American War and our flirtation with Manifest Destiny. It expresses a desire for a time when America was still in the process of exploring new frontiers. The other contrast, of course, is with the "young and dynamic" American society compared to the "soiled and dying" European society. This vision sees the destruction of the conspiracy as the final frontier America must surmount to maintain her greatness.

It is clear that the John Birch Society is becoming an American institution. Its support runs deep enough in members and resources that it is not likely to disappear from the American scene overnight. It is also clear that the Society in the twenty years of its existence, has been unable to unite larger numbers of people under its banner. I suggest that this is not likely to change for a number of reasons. First, the Society vision depends upon a very strong fundamentalist religious background. The connection between the conspiracy rhetorical vision and the religious quest of maintaining purity seem so close that anyone not possessing the background would not likely be comfortable as a group member. In that the vast majority of Americans do not believe in this kind of intense fundamentalism the potential membership list is made smaller. In addition, many religious fundamentalists have been inclined to withdraw from

political activities while Birch membership requires active participation. Second, the Society is continually portrayed by the media as being radical and participating in a radical organization requires a certain amount of courage. The Society itself recognizes this and tells prospective members that they must be prepared for "smear" attacks and "harassment." It is likely that the risk of these attacks causes people to fear rejection by friends and peers and cannot be tolerated by many. Third, it is likely that the conspiracy drama simply goes too far and frightens too many people. To participate in a drama in which your church, your school, your country, and your union are filled with corruption and slipping into the hands of loathsome conspiracy makes your role become either that of a dupe or a fellow conspirator. The decision to believe in the conspiracy probably also seems too depressing for most people. Not many people want to be worried about their imminent destruction every moment of their lives. Finally, Birch Society participation means a lot of hard work, and it is likely that most people, even if they believe in what the Society stands for, are too apathetic. Memberships means attendance at meetings, reading Society propaganda to keep up with discussions, participating in letter-writing campaigns, and devoting time for projects such as maintaining the bookstores. It is likely the reason for the limitation of membership lies somewhere in a combination of these different explanations.

Regardless of the inability of the John Birch Society to grow to the point of national political control, it remains a potent political and social force. The conspiracy drama causes the organization to maintain the unquestioned support of its membership and this drama has continually appealed to enough new members to keep the Society healthy. It is not likely that the John Birch Society will soon disappear from the American scene for conspiracy theory will continually be able to explain away arguments contradicting its claims as further evidence of

the insidiousness of the conspirators. It is clear the American political system by its nature allows for the participation of people of many different political persuasions and Birchers can therefore be expected to continue their participation.

ENDNOTES

¹It seems somewhat remarkable that so little has been written about the John Birch Society.

Speech Communication journals contain two rather traditional criticisms of radical right figures relevant to this discussion. Anthony Hillbruner's "A Night on Bald Mountain or Variations on a Theme by McCarthy" in Today's Speech 10 (February, 1962) 1-4, offers a criticism of a speech made by Robert Welch to a Los Angeles, California audience. The work is especially concerned with Welch's delivery style and the apparent effects of this speech on his audience. There is little that can be gleaned from this essay about the Society's rhetoric generally. Barnett Baskerville in "The Cross and the Flag: Evangelists of the Far Right," Western Speech 28 (Fall, 1963) 197-206, was concerned with criticizing speeches by Drs. Frederick Schwarz, Billy James Hargis, and Carl McIntire. While this essay contributes to our understanding of reactionary rhetoric generally, it contributes little to our understanding of the Birch Society specifically.

In an attempt to discover the accuracy of reactionary rhetorical messages Keith R. Sanders and Robert P. Newman in "John A. Stormer and the Hofstadter Hypothesis," Central States Speech Journal 22 (Fall, 1971) 218-27, discovered that the work None Dare Call It Treason contained a considerable amount of distorted evidence.

A final article in our discipline, which seems important to this current manuscript was completed by Philip C. Wander in "The John Birch and Martin Luther King Symbols in the Radical Right," Western Speech 35 (Winter, 1971) 4-14. This work examined the role of hero and devil figures in the radical right. While the work is symbolic by nature it does not discuss the appeal behind these hero or devil terms and thus does not account for the "why" of movement development.

The original source which linked the concept of conspiracy to the development of the radical right was Richard Hofstadter's The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966). This book contributes much to the identification of the conspiracy and offers a framework for the study of reactionary movements. My paper takes this perspective and uses it to examine the rhetoric of the John Birch Society.

²Robert Welch, The Blue Book of the John Birch Society (Boston: Western Islands, 1959).

³Charles Manion, a member of the national council of the John Birch Society is heard on some two hundred stations; Dan Smoot, former FBI agent and Birch member is heard on 125 stations. Recording to Benjamin Epstein and Arnold Forster, The Radical Right: Report on the John Birch Society and Its Allies (New York: Random House, 1967) 6-8.

⁴G. Edward Griffin, This Is The John Birch Society, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: American Media, 1972) p. 72.

⁵Ibid., p. 70.

⁶Ibid., pp. 14-15.

⁷The Blue Book, p. 149.

⁸The concept of "rhetorical vision" can be traced to Professor Ernest Bormann's work which suggests that motives, beliefs, and emotions are contained in the social dramas of groups interacting together. These rhetorical visions become bound together with events and fantasy themes which form a reality that is credible and compelling for those who subscribe to it. For a complete explanation of this method see: Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: A Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (1973) 143-59.

⁹John F. Cragan, "Rhetorical Strategy: A Dramatistic Interpretation and Application," Central States Speech Journal, 26 (Spring, 1975) p. 6.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 6.

¹¹Griffin, pp. 5-7.

¹²Ibid., p. 63.

¹³Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁴Cragan, p. 6.

¹⁵Dale G. Leathers, "Fundamentalism at the Radical Right," Southern Speech Journal, 33 (Summer, 1968) p. 247.

¹⁶ Richard Hofstadter, "Psuedo-Conservatism Revisited: A Postscript," The Radical Right, ed. by Daniel Bell (New York: Doubleday, 1963) p. 103.

¹⁷ The Blue Book, p. 58.

¹⁸ Griffin, p. 39.

¹⁹ Leathers, p. 248.

²⁰ Gary Allen, None Dare Call It Conspiracy (Seal Beach, Cal: Concord Press, 1971) p. 80.

²¹ Ibid., p. 93.

²² Ibid., pp. 78-127.

²³ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 107.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 46-57.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 53.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 108-12.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 133.

²⁹ John A. Stormer, None Dare Call It Treason (Florissant, Mo: Liberty Bell Press, 1964) p. 92.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 110.

³¹ Ibid.

- ³²Ibid., p. 114.
- ³³Ibid., p. 128.
- ³⁴J. Edgar Hoover, cited in None Dare Call It Treason, p. 133.
- ³⁵Stormer, p. 172.
- ³⁶Epstein and Forster, p. 93.
- ³⁷Griffin, p. 75.
- ³⁸Robert Welch, The Politician (Belmont, Mass: Belmont Publishing Company, 1963) p. 290.
- ³⁹Ibid.
- ⁴⁰Allen, pp. 8-9.
- ⁴¹Ibid., p. 9
- ⁴²Ibid., p. 14.
- ⁴³Ibid., p. 128.
- ⁴⁴The Blue Book, p. 46.